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THE LYNCHING OF PUBLIC OPINION

BY GEORGE ROTHWELL BROWN

A SUBSERVIENT press can prosper only under personal government, and it survives and flourishes then only when the manipulators of one-man power confuse the public mind with the dangerous doctrine that loyalty to an individual is synonymous with loyalty to the country. This cult can be maintained and spread only by a constant policing of public opinion, principally through the press.

During the past year and a half, there has been apparent at the fountain-head of government an autocratic assumption of responsibility for public opinion, so that we have come at last to the inevitable consequence—government by organized opinion. As a result of this system the American people today are generally in ignorance as to the conduct of the war, which they fought and for which they paid an extravagant price.

The lowering of the American press to idealize an individual, cloud an issue, and befog opinion, has been, from the point of view of American institutions of liberty, the most sinister development of the war. It has bred subserviency, disguised failure, and has clothed incompetency with the borrowed plumage of efficiency. Behind the wall of secrecy and deceit reared by the agile manipulators of public opinion throughout the war, blunders were made without exposure, and repeated at frightful cost because of that very lack; gold was dissipated without detection, fictitious personages were created out of nothingness and pigmies magnified to the stature of giants.

To understand what happened to the newspaper press of the country after our entrance into the war it is necessary to consider the state of public mind both before and after that date. With the outbreak of the war in Europe American public opinion was divided into three classes. There was a powerful minority opinion, clear-eyed as to the funda-

mental issue that had been raised between right and wrong. It was enlightened, militant, vigorously American, and strongly pro-Ally. Eventually it forced a reluctant Executive, of narrow horizon and limited world vision, to take a step in 1917, after an election had been fought and won on the platform, "He kept us out of war," that should have been taken when the German submarines challenged our right to use our own ocean highway.

There was, on the other hand, a noisy, unscrupulous, determined and abundantly-financed class that was viciously pro-German. In this class were those who excused the rape of Belgium, had no sympathy for France, hated England, were indifferent to America, and were so devoid of patriotic instincts that they openly rejoiced over the *Lusitania* murders.

Between these two classes was a third, composed of persons who knew nothing about the issues raised by the assault of the German people upon the peace and quiet of the world, and cared less. These were known as "neutrals." They inspired timid statesmanship with a ballot-box fear.

During the early stages of the war they encouraged the openly German element in our population to acts of outrageous defiance of the Government, and the courting of this pacifist element, which was largely German, had for months prevented the United States Government from taking measures to get the nation into readiness for war. That is one of the things that the manipulators of public opinion have thus far prevented from becoming known. We had an army—such as it was—on the Mexican border, but it was not permitted to study those methods of modern war that had been developed on the battlefields in France and Flanders. We organized no staff. We had no plans for participating in the war in Europe, which so many thoughtful men saw was inevitable. We actually waited until after we had troops in France to invent and perfect an army shoe suitable for service overseas. No courageous and alert press investigated these things, and sounded a warning.

Thus we deliberately permitted to develop a situation so dangerous, with respect to the treasonable element in our midst, that we were brought face to face with a problem at home as serious as that which awaited us across the water. It was felt to be necessary to deal with it by drastic methods. But the newspapers found themselves already shackled.

They learned of dangerous things going on beneath the outwardly placid surface, but they dared not print them. They quietly pushed their investigations here and there, or information was secretly brought to them.

It was well-nigh impossible to use facts in a way that would have benefitted the country by speeding up the war. The newspapers, by assisting in the lynching of public opinion, had created such a disordered state of mind in the country that if they themselves had raised their voices to full strength in protest against inefficiency they would have been denounced as "pro-German." That fear hung over the head of everybody. The very incompetents who should have been shown up and thrown out sought refuge behind this psychological barrier. Newspapers above all things dreaded that German propaganda charge, and rightly. The country was so worked up that any newspaper might have been ruined by falling under that suspicion, however, baseless. The trouble was that the public, that was getting its denatured news from the Government news factories, had nothing upon which to base an intelligent and honest opinion. Congress itself was all but terrorized. Statesmen feared to criticise lest the newspapers accuse them of being pro-German, and the newspapers halted and floundered lest their efforts to help things along should be wrongly construed. How the newspaper press could escape from this situation became the concern of some enlightened editors, and an agreement by which certain newspapers, and certain public men might aid one another in shaking off some of the fetters was at one time almost reached.

What did much to restore and encourage, for a time at least, freedom of speech and of the printing press, was the courageous stand taken by Senator Chamberlain, chairman of the Senate Military Affairs Committee, in his New York speech, wherein he charged that in some branches the War Department had almost ceased to function, and in the investigation of the war which he conducted, and which did so much to speed up the war. The breach between the Oregon Senator and the head of his own party, as a result of this patriotic boldness, served notice to others who might wish to attempt the same thing of what they might expect if they did.

So Congress—which had no press agent—became dumb. It seemed to lie helpless at the feet of one man, who gathered into his own hands all the powers of press and legislature, and parcelled them out at his pleasure to bureaus and extra-governmental boards and commissions. These boards grew like mushrooms. In a few months after the war had got haltingly under way Washington had to be rebuilt to house them, and their complexities had become so bewilderingly intricate that the heads of them, unable to keep track of what was going on, in turn passed many important functions over to subordinates with whose manifold activities by the very nature of things they could not always be in touch.

From this concentration of power in the hands of one, which in turn necessitated the delegation of that power to creatures of the Executive, sprang two institutions fatal to a free printing press—the press agent, and its inevitable corollary, the “official denial.” Where one is, there shall the other be found also. With Congress doing the legislating there are five hundred public men whom the newspaper correspondents, standing between the people and their public servants as common carriers of information, may see, interview, and ply with confidential questions. When law-making passes into the hands of one man there is but a single individual who may be seen with any degree of authority, and no one man has the time to be a source of news. Hence the excuse for the press agent. There had been press agents in some of the Government departments prior to the war. The institution was known to be pernicious. It developed during the war into something the like of which this country had never known before. Hand in hand with the press agent went the “denial,” for the “denial” is as essential to Government-owned “publicity” as is the press agent himself. The “denial” is for the hardy rebel who ventures out of the realms of official fiction to invade the forbidden fields of ascertained fact.

Whether by accident or design, “publicity” in war-time Washington developed along a new and original line. It became a censorship that accomplished its purpose not by starvation, but by over-feeding. The floods of publicity poured out of the Government bureaus and boards in Washington, each with its busy press agent, fairly overwhelmed

the newspapers. Most of the Washington correspondents speedily became intellectually devitalized. These scouts and sentinels of the American people at their Capital had for generations performed an honorable and a useful service to the country. With a few exceptions they followed the example of Congress, surrendered to the inevitable, and wrote what they were told, all from the loftiest of motives and in the name of patriotism.

The capitulation of the press, I take it, was none less abject and deplorable because the ideals which inspired it were commendable. The press, meaning both publishers and news gatherers, conceived it to be a duty to the country to close their eyes to what was obviously going on only a little beneath the surface. They accepted the output of the official "news" factories and sent it broadcast, accepting the theory that in so doing they were performing a conscientious duty.

The reaction on the people was natural and inevitable. Being deprived of fact they formed erroneous conclusions upon misinformation. The lynching of public opinion was complete and freedom of thought for the first time in American history was about suppressed. In accord with the same theory, Congress passed drastic laws which made the expression of an honest conviction about the conduct of the war a thing to be done with fear and trembling. Only a few brave voices were heard here and there in the land. To its eternal credit Congress refused to enact the drastic censorship law which was sought, but an absolute censorship was not really essential, for it had been achieved in effect by natural processes; while across the seas a remorseless military censorship, controlled by the political power, was master of every word sent by mail or cable. This censorship was designed, not merely to prevent information of value to the enemy from falling into the hands of Germany, which was a legitimate function of the military authority, but to prevent information of value to the American people from reaching the American public. This censorship kept from the American people, at a critical time, the failures made by those same incompetent officials who enforced the censorship which protected them. During the war period the public was treated as an infant. It was supposed, for example, after the armistice had been signed, and the war was over, that the American people could not stand

the truth about our battle casualties, which were shockingly uneconomic; and so Washington gave out that the total losses would not exceed 100,000, at a time when it was well known that they would go above 250,000.

This is the system, of which the corner-stone is denatured news, which bent professional news-gatherers, men of a noble and highly responsible calling, to the will of incompetent or head-strong officials. It was this system which led people to accept as an historical fact the absurd story of a marvellous sea battle which was never fought and made possible the Liberty Motor hoax. The Liberty motor was in process of reconstruction and perfection for months after that falsehood was put forth. Heaven knows how many lives it cost, the lives of ill-trained, half-equipped, poorly-led American soldiers, fighting hand to hand with the trained veterans of the German armies in the dark forests of the Argonne, looking anxiously overhead for the fleets of Yankee airplanes, which they had read about in every deceived American journal, but which never came to their aid for the most excellent reason that they were not in existence.

What strong-arm methods were employed to keep fearless and independent newspapers from publishing the news of their own getting, in preference to the denatured news thrust upon them, only time will disclose. At times the press agents in Washington grew bold, and seeing in some paper more fearless than the rest a displeasing item, would write haughtily to the editor, saying, "Please make a correction, and send us a copy of the paper containing it!" Such were the arrogant methods actually applied to American newspapers and to which American newspapers out of sheer patriotism submitted.

The few Washington correspondents who, during the war, revolted at the surrender of what had been a noble profession, and who undertook to write fearlessly and frankly the truth as they could find it in the rare undefiled channels of news remaining open, were brow-beaten, threatened and insulted. They would obtain confidentially from one member of the Cabinet information of importance to the country, only to have its publication denounced by another who did not know the facts.

In consequence of this the Washington correspondents during the war steadily declined in morale. Their environ-

ment was too much for them. From diligently searching for the truth alone they came to hunt, not merely in couples, but in flocks and droves. Their conferences with responsible heads of Government departments degenerated into farces. Their vision being restricted by reason of the fact that they had nothing to go upon except the doctored news which was their daily mental diet, their inquiries of these public servants rarely rose above the trivial. The correspondents who had once been proud of their profession lost that pride, and all but lost their self-respect.

Although Congress some years before, in recognition of the growing peril of the Government press agent, had included in an appropriation bill a clause to prevent the use of any of the money thus appropriated from being expended on fabricated news (an act of Congress never effective), the official press agent flourished as though expressly authorized by the law-making body. The situation became so bad in Washington, especially during the war period, that every little minor official had a press agent of his own, to serve his own selfish ends and enhance his own prestige. In some departments responsible officials were prohibited from making public any information, even of a routine and trivial character, except through the medium of the press agent. Thus the distribution of news—the property of the people—was controlled by the few, and information, to which the taxpayers were entitled, because they were paying for the up-keep of the Government agencies which were creating it by their official acts, was colored and distorted at its source of origin. Even press associations “handled” this official stuff and would send out to the country over their own wires, to their clients, official agents’ statements so used as to indicate their own responsibility for the “news” contained therein.

The surrender of Congress with the coming of war speedily resulted in Senators and Congressmen themselves becoming as ignorant of what was going on as anyone else. The only real source of news was an inaccessible figure who terminated his intercourse with newspaper men shortly after proclaiming the policy of “pitiless publicity,” and who did not resume those relations, which had long existed between the correspondents and the President, until he returned from Paris to find Congress and the country in an uproar over the League of Nations.

The White House conference upon that subject between the President and members of the Congressional Committees on Foreign Affairs was of transcendent news value, and the correspondents, deprived of opportunity to learn from the President what had occurred, were compelled to obtain that information elsewhere, piecemeal. The New York *Sun's* frank exposure of what happened at the famous dinner, especially with respect to the absorbing topic of Ireland and the League of Nations, was a public service of high order. The *Sun's* exposure also focused attention upon the "official denial," which it was the means of brilliantly illuminating.

The wide publicity that is being given to Mr. Taft's advocacy of the League of Nations, through recognized independent news channels, is a case in point. Mr. Taft, although long a private citizen, is enjoying today in advocacy of the President's programme, a wider use of the newspaper columns than he could obtain, except in interviews and signed statements, when he was President of the United States and a candidate for re-election.

President Roosevelt looked upon the Fourth Estate as the eyes of the people. He made use of the Washington correspondents in preparing public opinion for the adoption of his progressive policies, but in doing this, like the master of men that he was, he did not degrade the writers—he lifted them up. There was a decided intellectual renaissance in Washington journalism under Roosevelt. The newspaper men of Washington were richer for their contact with Theodore Roosevelt, although many newspaper men cordially hated him and were slow to acknowledge the debt they owed him. The newspaper men of Washington are the poorer for President Wilson, who has given them nothing.

GEORGE ROTHWELL BROWN.